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# HOUSEWIVES DISCUSS NUTRITION PROGRAMS

A STUDY IN BRIDGEPORT, CONNECTICUT  
AND RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

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Information about nutrition reaches the American housewife from a great many sources: the radio, newspapers, magazines, booklets and pamphlets, meetings and classes. How effective are these efforts to spread nutrition education? How many housewives use such information in planning and preparing their families' meals? How can more be persuaded to do so?

These were the questions upon which the Division of Program Surveys, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, sought information in a survey made during November and December 1943. This study was made at the request of the Nutrition Programs Branch of the Office of Distribution, War Food Administration. Two cities - Bridgeport, Connecticut, and Richmond, Virginia - were chosen for the study since both had experienced rather intensive programs of nutrition education. In each city about two hundred women representing all housewives in the city were interviewed.

This pamphlet presents the findings of the survey and some suggestions for making nutrition programs more effective.

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## I. HOW EFFECTIVE ARE PROGRAMS OF NUTRITION EDUCATION?

### Almost all women receive some nutrition information

In the two cities studied - Bridgeport and Richmond - almost all of the housewives have received some nutrition information. Most women pick up items from the radio, the newspaper, or their favorite magazines; a few go to community-sponsored classes; others read booklets on the subject. Only a small number, about ten percent, apparently have had no contact with the widespread sources of nutrition information.

Furthermore, contrary to the popular belief that nutrition knowledge is confined to persons in the higher income levels, women in all income and occupational groups receive information. It is possible, of course, that there are differences in the quality of the information received among different groups. In this study no attempt was made to estimate the usefulness or accuracy of the specific information about food which the housewife obtained.

A housewife's education does have an effect on the likelihood of her receiving information. The more years of formal schooling she has had, the more likely she is to read information about food and to go to nutrition meetings and classes. Women with less education, however, are just as likely as women with higher education to receive information about food over the radio.

### But housewives' knowledge of nutrition is often fragmentary

The large proportion of women who have come into contact with nutrition information should not be overstressed; here are some further findings which throw light on the general level of nutrition knowledge among housewives:

- (1) Only two-fifths of the housewives in these two cities understand the concept of a balanced diet.

(Note: In most of the tables in this pamphlet, proportions are presented separately for Bridgeport and for Richmond. Since findings in the cities are remarkably similar, however, the differences within each city, rather than differences between cities, are the important ones to consider.)

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| <u>In</u><br><u>Bridgeport</u> | <u>In</u><br><u>Richmond</u> |  | <u>For Example:</u>  |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|--|--|
| 43%                            | 38%                          | understand the concept of a balanced diet and have enough information about food elements to achieve an adequately balanced diet | "You need meat and eggs for protein and you ought to include starches for energy, and milk for the calcium for the teeth. You don't need meat and eggs together. You need cereals and vegetables for their vitamins and minerals, and fruit because their vitamins build up resistance." |
| 40%                            | 46%                          | have scattered and disorganized information about diet, but do not understand the concept of balancing various food elements     | "Meat and vegetables. That's about all except desserts and fruits. I've heard people can live on vegetables but I think you should have meat. The system requires a certain amount of fat."  |
| 15%                            | 15%                          | have no apparent understanding of nutrition  | "I just grew up eating what I was supposed to. We always ate everything our mother put on the table and we still do. I still go by her judgment of what was best."   |
| The knowledge of               |                              |  |  |
| 2%                             | 1%                           | was not ascertained  |  |

As in the previous studies\* done by this Division among housewives in Omaha and Providence, and among industrial workers in Peoria and in

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\* See "Nutrition and the War," November 1943, issued through Division of Program Surveys by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics.

Evansville many women in the present study appear to have a rather unsatisfactory knowledge of nutrition. Perhaps they get along well enough under ordinary circumstances, but their knowledge is apparently not sufficient to enable them to make wise adjustments during periods of food restrictions, or of family illness or other emergency.

- (2) Some housewives do not substitute readily for certain foods.

Housewives were asked what foods they substitute for the ones they can't get. The substitutions that housewives do make are generally adequate, but a considerable number seem to be cutting down on butter, eggs, milk, and fruit without using substitutes for them. It is true, however, that even though many housewives are unable to give correct nutritional reasons for needing certain foods, customary substitutions often stand them in good stead.

- (3) Few housewives have made important changes in diet as a result of nutrition programs.

While about two-thirds of all housewives interviewed say they have made some changes in meal-planning and preparation as a result of contact with nutrition programs, in many cases such changes are only minor. For example, some women simply try out a new recipe or two, but make no basic changes. The following table shows to what extent nutrition programs have been effective in encouraging housewives to make changes in their food habits.



| <u>In</u><br><u>Bridgeport</u> | : | <u>In</u><br><u>Richmond</u> |  | <u>For Example:</u>  |
|--------------------------------|---|------------------------------|--|--|
| 21%                            | : | 28%                          | have made some important food changes as a result of receiving nutrition information | "I bought a new kind of cereal with more vitamins in it. We did a lot of canning and I read all about that in the Government bulletins on canning. I got some pretty good recipes on substitutes from the magazines, too." |
|                                | : |                              |  | - - - - -  |
| 42%                            | : | 36%                          | have made minor changes  | "I did try one recipe with tuna fish and scalloped potatoes."  |
|                                | : |                              |  | - - - - -  |
| 22%                            | : | 25%                          | have contacted programs, but made no changes   | "I don't pay attention to those things. I used to cook for wealthy people and I learned a lot about cooking from these American people. Then, I studied it once at school."  |
|                                | : |                              |  | - - - - -  |
| 13%                            | : | 9%                           | have had no contact with programs  |  |
| Information for                |   |                              |  |  |
| 2%                             | : | 2%                           | was not ascertained  |  |

These findings illustrate the need for a greater understanding of nutrition among many women to enable them to make better use of the sources of information which are available to them. In spite of the success which programs of nutrition education have had in providing information about food to large numbers of housewives, many still are without an adequate understanding of the way to apply such information in balancing the total diet.

Part II of this pamphlet presents suggested explanations for the inadequacy of nutrition knowledge among many women. Part III gives some suggestions for improving nutrition programs in the light of these findings.

## II. WHY HAS NOT NUTRITION EDUCATION MADE A DEEPER IMPRESSION UPON HOUSEWIVES?

Many women do not fully understand  
how nutrition information can help them

Previous studies conducted by the Division of Program Surveys have shown that many housewives do not feel a great need to learn more facts about nutrition. They don't think or speak in such terms, and this probably reflects a basic satisfaction with their present knowledge and accustomed ways of doing things. As pointed out in our earlier report, "Nutrition and the War," many people tend to follow the logic that since they are not noticeably unhealthy they must be eating an adequate diet.

The survey in Bridgeport and in Richmond reflects a similar lack of concern for problems of nutrition among many housewives. It has been shown that most women receive some information about food, but this does not mean that all take active steps to acquire the information. From housewives' remarks concerning their sources of information it was possible to judge whether they have displayed initiative in obtaining nutrition information, are passively interested in nutrition but take no active steps to obtain information, or have no interest in nutrition information and pay little attention to it when they happen to come into contact with it. This is what was found:



| <u>In</u><br><u>Bridgeport</u> | : | <u>In</u><br><u>Richmond</u> |                | <u>For Example:</u>           |
|--------------------------------|---|------------------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|
| 41%                            | : | 49%                          | have shown     | "I look up the things they    |
| :                              | : | :                            | initiative     | print in the newspapers.      |
| :                              | : | :                            | in obtaining   | They print good things about  |
| :                              | : | :                            | nutrition      | what people should eat."      |
| :                              | : | :                            | information    |                               |
| 29%                            | : | 29%                          | have passive   | "Those radio programs are     |
| :                              | : | :                            | interest, but  | interesting. You learn a      |
| :                              | : | :                            | show no initi- | lot of things, but I don't    |
| :                              | : | :                            | ative in ob-   | have time and I only hear     |
| :                              | : | :                            | taining in-    | them when I have the radio    |
| :                              | : | :                            | formation      | on while I'm resting."        |
| 29%                            | : | 20%                          | have no        | "I'm one of those old-        |
| :                              | : | :                            | interest in    | fashioned cooks. I can al-    |
| :                              | : | :                            | nutrition      | ways go on and cook what I've |
| :                              | : | :                            |                | got to cook better than I can |
| :                              | : | :                            |                | with those recipes I hear and |
| :                              | : | :                            |                | read about."                  |
| The attitudes of               |   |                              |                |                               |
| 1%                             | : | 2%                           | were not       |                               |
| :                              | : | :                            | ascertained    |                               |

While it is encouraging that a fairly large group of women show active interest in obtaining nutrition information in these two cities, more than half must yet be convinced that such information is worth seeking. As the chart below illustrates, housewives who have learned a little about nutrition (i.e., they understand the concept of a balanced diet) are likely to be interested in learning more. But women who know least about nutrition display the least interest in improving their knowledge.

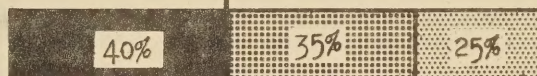


Among women who:

Understand the  
concept of a  
balanced diet





Have scattered  
and disorganized  
information on  
nutrition




Have no apparent  
understanding of  
nutrition



 Show initiative in  
obtaining nutrition  
information \*

 Have passive  
interest. \*

 Have no in-  
terest \*

Thus, without enough understanding of nutrition to see how such knowledge can help them, few women take active steps to acquire nutrition information.

Even war food restrictions  
have not aroused a feeling of  
need for nutrition information

It might perhaps be expected that a period of food restrictions such as the war emergency might arouse a greater interest than usual in the subject of nutrition. For example, women who had difficulty making adjustments might turn for help to sources of information about food.

As in previous studies conducted by this Division, it was found that very few women feel greatly concerned about the healthfulness of their families' diets as a result of present restrictions on various foods:

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\* Figures for Bridgeport and Richmond combined.



In  
Bridgeport : In  
Richmond

For Example:

72% : 76% feel the family  
: are getting all  
: they need to  
: keep healthy

"I weigh just the same as I  
did fifteen years ago - so I  
guess that's a good sign. My  
meals are well-balanced. You  
don't need so much meat - you  
can eat eggs to take their  
place."

"They aren't kicking. They  
are working so far and haven't  
sat home from being sick."

26% : 17% feel the  
: family's health  
: is affected to  
: a minor degree

"I guess we're getting the  
foods we need. But lots of  
times I don't have all I think  
I should have for that day. I  
might just have two starches  
and a meat for a meal, where-  
as I don't have points to get  
something else. I'm not much  
on settin' my table on food  
and calories and everything,  
but I kinda have an idea about  
what a balanced meal should  
be."

2% : 6% feel the  
: family's health  
: is greatly  
: affected

"I have been sick since last  
October, and I really feel  
milk and juices and green  
vegetables are the best for  
me, and I don't always get  
all the juices I should have.  
I don't always have the money  
and sometimes I run out of  
points. The juices keep me  
going. I don't get enough  
milk. It gives me strength,  
but it's rationed now like  
everything else."

The opinions of

0% : 1% were not  
ascertained



In all, about a quarter of the housewives have some reservations regarding the complete adequacy of the meals they serve their families. When these housewives are considered separately from the women who are completely satisfied with the healthfulness of their families' meals, they reveal as a group no greater interest in nutrition information than other women, and are no more inclined to take steps to obtain such information.

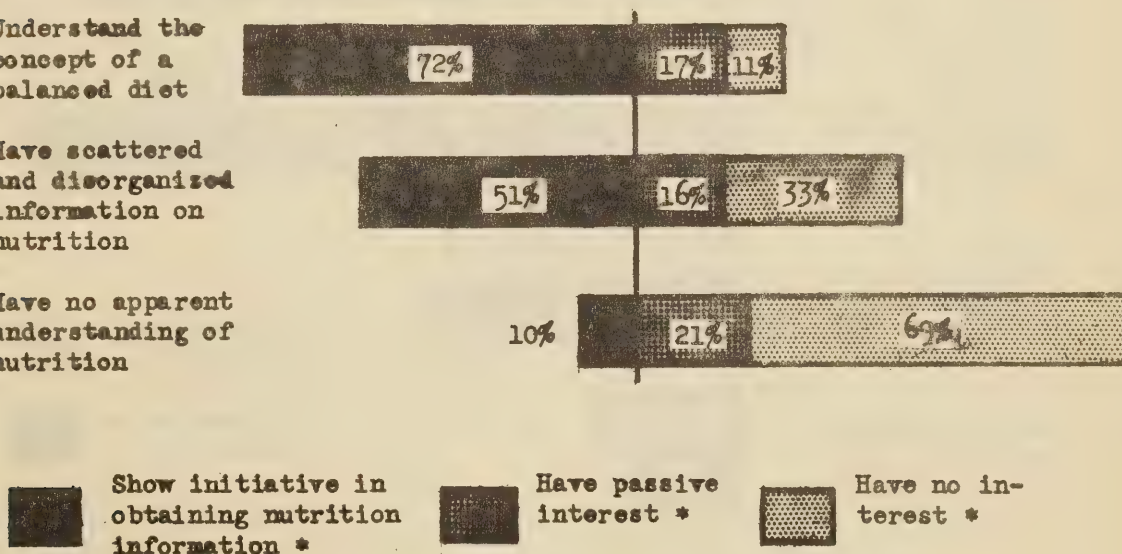
In the previous section it was shown that need for nutrition information, as indicated by lack of knowledge, is no guarantee that women will attempt to acquire such information. Similarly, concern over the effect of war food restrictions, another indicator of need for information, does not necessarily result in an attempt to obtain information. As shown in the chart below, most women who feel concerned about food restrictions seek nutritional advice only if they already have some nutrition information. If they have little knowledge of nutrition they do not understand how the findings of nutritional science can help them out of their present difficulty, and consequently they are very unlikely to seek such information.

Women who feel concerned about the effects of wartime food restrictions and who:

Understand the concept of a balanced diet

Have scattered and disorganized information on nutrition

Have no apparent understanding of nutrition



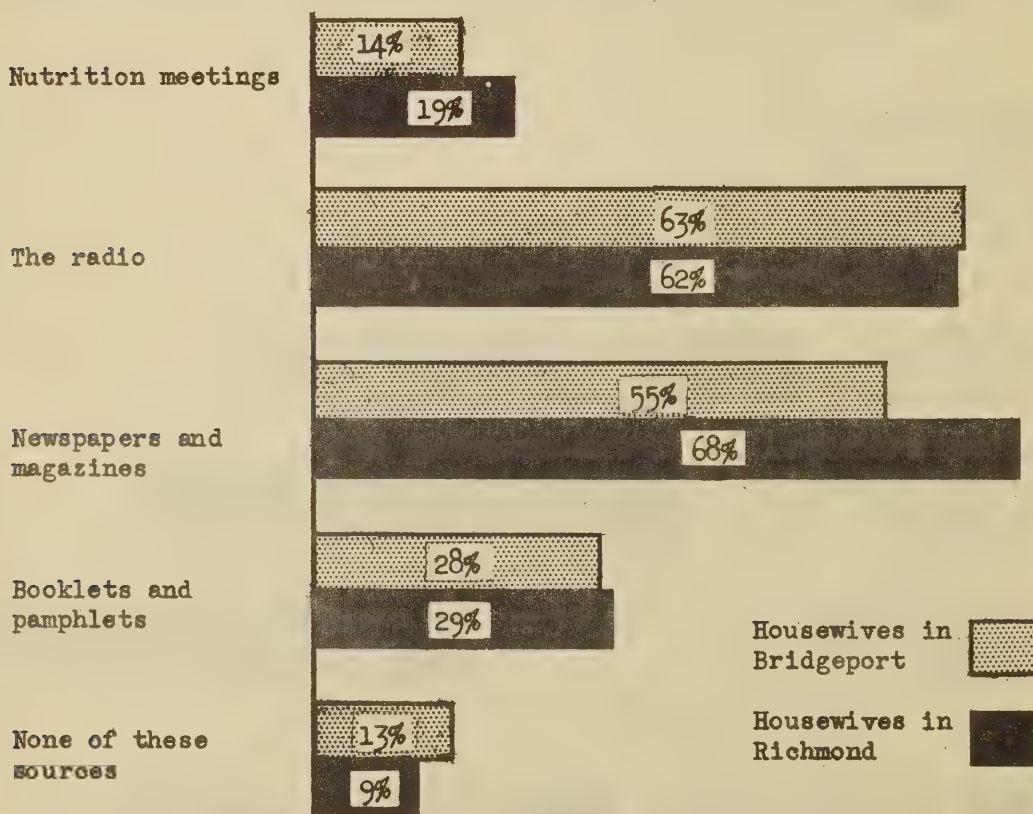
\* Figures for Bridgeport and Richmond combined.



Many sources of food information  
subordinate nutrition instruction  
to other purposes

A lack of interest in nutrition is one explanation for the fact that many housewives have inadequate nutrition knowledge, even though most women have come into contact with the sources of information. Another reason lies in the character of the sources of information which are used. Many more housewives get information about foods from the radio, newspapers and magazines than from booklets and pamphlets on food, or from nutrition meetings:

Have received  
 information from:



The great variety in the type and quality of food information makes it difficult to characterize the material in the various sources.



But it is apparent that mass media, such as the radio, newspapers and magazines, reach many housewives only incidentally. Information about foods is often sandwiched in with other material of a different character and purpose.

Not only is much food information subordinate to other purposes in its presentation, but a housewife's reaction to this information is often more or less accidental. Perhaps she reads a women's magazine mainly for its fiction features; while tracing a story carried over from one page to another she finds a section devoted to menu suggestions for the month. Or while listening to a radio serial drama she hears an announcer interrupt to describe the benefits of an advertised product.

On the other hand, booklets and pamphlets on food are generally directed specifically to disseminating information about food or nutrition. Presumably a person who reads such material has some interest in its subject and will try to apply the information contained. In this study women who have read booklets and pamphlets more often say they have made some use of the information than do women who have obtained information from other sources. It is also probably true that women who read booklets on food problems make more important applications of the material than does the average housewife who receives information in other ways.

Thus the rather haphazard contacts which many women have with nutrition information means that there is little assurance that they will take active steps to apply what they have heard or read. Perhaps a more serious result of such contacts is that many women fail to achieve the first step in an understanding of nutrition - i.e., an understanding of the concept of a balanced diet. The value of particular foods or of particular food practices tends to be fixed in their minds, but this information could be much more helpful to them if it were closely related to the planning of balanced meals.



### III. HOW CAN PROGRAMS OF NUTRITION EDUCATION BE MADE MORE EFFECTIVE?

Most women have few criticisms of nutrition programs. Some housewives do say they have not used information from nutrition programs because it is impractical and too expensive to apply, but these objections are infrequent. Other housewives say they don't have the time to give to these subjects, or they know all they need to know about them; but both these remarks probably mask indifference to and unawareness of the usefulness of such information. Thus the problem is not to meet active criticisms of nutrition programs, but rather to arouse the interest of those who now use sources of information infrequently and in casual ways.

Most women want information which will  
help them to provide interesting and  
varied meals, and to save time and money

While most women are not actively interested in the subject of nutrition, it would be a mistake to assume that housewives therefore do not have interests and needs which are related to foods and nutrition. Our interviewers have found that "rapport" with respondents is rarely so good as when housewives are asked to discuss their food problems. Housewives talk freely on such subjects as meal-planning and preparation, shopping habits, and food expenses. From their discussion of the uses they have made of the various types of nutrition programs, it seems clear that they value these sources of information mainly as they help them fulfill their functions as cooks and economizers for their families - whose job is to provide tasty, economical, and simple meals day after day. (As shown earlier, about two-thirds of the housewives have used information from nutrition programs, though relatively few have made important changes as a result.)

| <u>In</u><br><u>Bridgeport</u> | : | <u>In</u><br><u>Richmond</u> |   |
|--------------------------------|---|------------------------------|---|
| 65%                            | : | 66%                          | have used information from nutrition programs   |
| 43%*                           | : | 48%*                         | to achieve variety in food preparation through new recipes and menus; more interesting use of left-overs; use of new foods; better cooking techniques |
| 25%                            | : | 17%                          | to make their families' diets more nutritive  |
| 13%                            | : | 15%                          | to meet food problems arising from the war food situation through adjustments to ration point system; learning substitutions for scarce foods         |
| 4%                             | : | 7%                           | to reduce their food bill   |
| 22%                            | : | 25%                          | have contacted programs, but made no use of the information   |
| 13%                            | : | 9%                           | have had no contact with nutrition programs   |

As the table above indicates, a considerable proportion do recognize the importance of nutrition information in improving the nutritive quality of the meals they serve. But for the most part women seem to appreciate programs and sources of information about food because they help them provide variety in the daily meal. Quite a few also show interest in using the information to make better adjustments to the wartime food situation, as shown by their interest in learning substitutions for scarce foods, in lowering their food expenditures, and in solving their ration point problems.

This interest in increasing the variety of meals and in learning other than nutritive aspects of meal-preparation is not confined to women who have inferior knowledge of nutrition. Even women who appear to have a good general understanding of nutrition have used sources of information about food mainly to help them provide variety in their food preparation, as the table below illustrates. Of course they are

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\*Percentages total more than 65 percent and 66 percent, respectively, because several women reported more than one use of nutrition programs.



also quite likely to have used the information to improve the nutritive properties of meals, whereas women with a poorer knowledge of nutrition tend to be interested only in aspects of meal-preparation other than problems of nutrition.

| <u>Among women who</u> | : | <u>Among women who</u> |                                    |
|------------------------|---|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <u>understand the</u>  | : | <u>do not under-</u>   |                                    |
| <u>concept of a</u>    | : | <u>stand the con-</u>  |                                    |
| <u>balanced diet *</u> | : | <u>cept *</u>          |                                    |
|                        | : |                        |                                    |
| 80%                    | : | 55%                    | have used information from nutri-  |
|                        | : |                        | tion programs                      |
|                        | : |                        |                                    |
| 53%                    | : | 42%                    | to achieve variety in food         |
|                        | : |                        | preparation                        |
|                        | : |                        |                                    |
| 34%                    | : | 12%                    | to make their families' diets      |
|                        | : |                        | more nutritive                     |
|                        | : |                        |                                    |
| 18%                    | : | 12%                    | to meet food problems arising      |
|                        | : |                        | from the war food situation        |
|                        | : |                        |                                    |
| 8%                     | : | 4%                     | to reduce their food bill          |
|                        | : |                        |                                    |
| 15%                    | : | 31%                    | have contacted programs, but made  |
|                        | : |                        | no use of the information          |
|                        | : |                        |                                    |
| 5%                     | : | 14%                    | have had no contact with nutrition |
|                        | : |                        | programs                           |

Obviously, the uses women say they have made of available nutrition programs are limited by the kinds of information the programs offer. For this reason, it would be useful to know what information housewives would ask for if they could select their own programs. In this study housewives were asked what information they would like to have if they attended meetings and classes on nutrition. In general, the kinds of information housewives say they would be interested in are the same as those they have used from nutrition programs. They want to learn ways of preparing foods that will add variety to daily

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\* Figures for Bridgeport and Richmond combined.

meals: new recipes and menus, better use of left-overs, good cooking techniques, efficient methods of meal-planning and preparation.

Housewives' concern with problems of  
meal preparation can be utilized to  
increase interest in nutrition programs

It is probably true that because women have not learned to recognize a need for nutrition information, they are more likely to desire information on certain aspects of meal-preparation other than the nutritive aspects. Improvements in the general level of education will probably do much to arouse the interest in nutrition that is now only latent among most women. But programs of nutrition education can start with the needs that housewives do feel, and combine nutrition information with suggestions for meeting these needs. For most housewives, it would seem advisable to give facts on nutrition only in conjunction with specific advice on recipes, menus, use of left-overs, substitutions for scarce foods, and similar information. Conversely, advice on recipes and menus should be accompanied by facts on nutrition. Emphasis on the idea of a balanced diet would be particularly useful, so that housewives may continually expand their knowledge by fitting it into this basic concept. Gradually housewives may acquire an understanding of the importance of nutrition and begin to consider the nutritive requirements of foods more consciously.

A program which aims at a wide coverage of housewives should in its publicity and actual contents stress the point that the information will make the housewife's job easier. It should take care not to frighten her off by the prospect of having to learn a great deal of technical information which she hasn't felt to be necessary. Women who have taken the first steps in nutrition education will participate, since they too want primarily to learn better ways of doing their daily job of meal-planning and preparation; and it seems likely that many more of the now non-participating group will take an interest.

On the other hand, programs of nutrition education should attempt to avoid being identified simply as "cooking schools." Many housewives feel they know how to cook, and can only be interested in programs about food if they are convinced that the information covers more than cooking.

The media which reach most house-  
wives can be used more directly

While undoubtedly all media for spreading nutrition information have a useful place, it seems probable that the media which reach a great many



housewives can be utilized to greater advantage. Women who have little interest in nutrition can not easily be prevailed upon to read booklets and pamphlets on nutrition, or to attend nutrition meetings. These housewives must probably first be reached through media which do not entail their going to a great deal of trouble to acquire information - i.e., the radio, newspapers, and magazines.

In this connection, the finding that information on foods via the radio reaches all educational groups is of particular interest. Since many women who listen to the radio do not have a sophisticated understanding of food problems, it would seem advisable not to pitch the programs at a very sophisticated level. Many women who report having heard information on food over the radio are interested mainly in the radio's entertainment features, and it is not likely that a formal talk on nutrition would hold much interest for them. A program which combines information with entertainment seems much more likely to reach all women. Such programs might include dramatic skits, perhaps with songs about the "basic seven" and other nutrition facts.

Once interest in nutrition is acquired,  
women continue to learn about it

As shown on page 7 women who have some knowledge of nutrition display more initiative than other women in obtaining nutrition information. They also use the information they receive in more important ways; i.e., to make major changes in meal-planning, or to improve the nutritive value of their diets, rather than simply to try out one or two new recipes.

Thus, in one sense it can be said that "a little nutrition information will go a long way," for once housewives have taken the first steps in acquiring nutrition information they can be trusted to increase their knowledge.

This pamphlet has dealt with housewives' experiences with programs of nutrition education in two cities. In these two cities it was found that though the majority of women have come into contact with sources of information about food, a large proportion of them have no more than a fragmentary understanding of nutrition. Indifference to problems of nutrition is characteristic of many women; they are, however, concerned with other aspects of meal-planning and preparation. It is hoped that this pamphlet may suggest methods of utilizing housewives' present interests in order to increase the effectiveness of nutrition programs.









